

Little Rock Central High School

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Little Rock Central High School
National Historic Site



The Magnolia/Mobil Service Station



The restored Magnolia/Mobil service station, 2007. Photo by Ben Wagner.

“What Is Significant About the Gas Station?”

Visitors to the site often are curious about the restored gas station and how it relates to the stories of Central High School. The Magnolia/Mobil service station located at the corner of Daisy L. Gatson Bates Drive and Park Street was built in the 1920s, about the same time that Little Rock Central High School was built. Throughout the years, the building has served as a gas station, a hangout for students, a temporary “office” for reporters during the desegregation crisis, storage for a wholesale florist business, a National Historic Site visitor center, and in the near future as an education center.

The History of the Gas Station



This service station was built for the Magnolia Petroleum Company of Texas in the 1920s. Called the “Southwest” model, this station in Little Rock was identical to many others throughout Texas and Arkansas.

The Magnolia Petroleum Company was one of many regional oil companies owned by Magnolia Oil Corporation. Founded as Vacuum Oil Company of Rochester, New York by Matthew Ewing and Hirman Everest in 1866 the company became a subsidiary of John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Corporation of Ohio in 1979, and later a part of the Standard Oil Trust. In response to a 1911 Supreme Court decree against monopolies, the Standard Oil Group was broken into thirty-four companies. One of the successor companies, Standard Oil Company of New York (SOCONY), acquired full interest in the Magnolia Petroleum Company of Texas and some other regional oil companies before merging with the Vacuum Oil Company (another member of the Standard Oil Group) in 1931.

As Socony - Vacuum the company led the way in pioneering lubricants and new energy sources. The name changed to Socony Mobil Oil Company in 1955, Mobil Oil Corporation in 1966, and Mobil Corporation in 1976.

In the late 1950s, the station featured both Mobil and Magnolia signs to capitalize on regional and national brand identification. The station was in operation into the 1980s, when it closed and the building was acquired by the wholesale florist that was once located across the street. The company used it for storage until 1996, when Central High Museum, Inc., a nonprofit organization, purchased the property to use as a visitor center. The Mobil Foundation assisted in restoring the exterior of the station to its 1957 appearance. Mobil’s corporate archives supplied the architects with the original specifications for the vintage signage, the paint scheme, and the gas pumps. The visitor center opened in September 1997 for the 40th anniversary of the desegregation events at the school.

In November 1998, President Clinton signed legislation designating Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site as a unit of the National Park Service. Central High Museum, Inc. donated the property to the park service and the station served as the interim visitor center until September 2007, when the new, permanent center opened for the 50th Anniversary.

Did you know that in 1957. . .

...the price of a gallon of regular Mobil gasoline was 22.5 cents?

...a bottle of Dr. Pepper cost 10 cents?



The gas station before renovations began in 1996.

During the 1957-58
School Year

The service station was one of the few businesses in the immediate neighborhood and had a pay telephone on site. During the early days of the desegregation crisis, when reporters from all over the state, nation, and world converged on Little Rock, many phoned in their reports from the station. The press included a number of local and international reporters from magazines and newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *Life*, *Look*, *Arkansas Gazette*, *Arkansas Democrat*, *Arkansas State Press*, *Der Spiegel* (a German Periodical), *Chicago Defender*, and *Baltimore Afro-American*.

In the 1950s, television was entering mainstream America as a medium for news, and the events in Little Rock were among the first major news events to be televised. Reporters representing the major networks featured live footage of the events as Arkansas National Guard troops, on orders of the governor, kept nine African American teenagers out of the school.

“...the world media took a moral stand on Little Rock and they were horrified...there was so much media coverage, even though we knew [the people in the crowd] were crazy we also knew that they would have to be really crazy to kill one of us in public.”

Minnijean Brown Trickey



Little Rock Police Chief Gene Smith (right) talks to onlookers outside the Mobil station in September 1957. Central High Historical Collections/UALR Archives and Special Collections.

The Station’s Future

The service station today is being converted into Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site’s educational center. While keeping its historic appearance on the outside, inside the station will be renovated into classroom space, becoming a place where teachers and students can come to learn about the past and also the future of social justice and civil rights.



Workers install a new heating and air conditionag system on the Mobil station as the first phase of its renovation as the park’s education center, October 2007.